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A Thai Perspective on the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI)

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South Korea is a recent player joining the Indo-Pacific club. At the 23rd ASEAN-ROK Summit in November 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol announced the “Strategy for Free, Peaceful, Prosperous Indo-Pacific”, aiming to project the country’s aspiration to become a “Global Pivotal State”. The Strategy underlines the importance of the Indo-Pacific region as “home to 65 per cent of the world population, 62 per cent of the world’s GDP, 46 per cent of international trade and half of global maritime transport”. It also notes various regional security challenges, including rising geopolitical competition, North Korea’s advancement in its nuclear and missile capabilities and deteriorating confidence in multilateralism.

From Seoul’s point of view, ASEAN is positioned at the core of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. The region is one of the ROK’s key trading partners, emerging market for South Korean products and services, passage of energy supply and home of K-content fandoms. To win the hearts and

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minds of ASEAN countries and people, Seoul adopted the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), as part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. This article discusses strategic implications of KASI and prospects from a Thai perspective.

First, KASI is a demonstration of South Korea's continued engagement with ASEAN. It responds to the concern that the ROK would pay less attention to the region when the government changes. The idea of having an initiative to foster relationship with ASEAN was mentioned in President Yoon's electoral declaration. The meeting with 10 ASEAN ambassadors in May 2022, the first month of the Yoon administration, was the first meeting of ROK's Foreign Minister Park Jin with heads of foreign diplomatic missions.

Second, the Initiative sets practical prioritisation for Seoul to work with ASEAN countries in strategic areas. They include defense industry and cooperation, maritime security, economic security, digital trade and future industries, climate change and environment, public health, people-to-people exchange, political cooperation as well as subregional cooperation. To concretise these areas of cooperation, KASI lays down flagship projects with exact amount of financial support and timeframe, such as ASEAN-ROK Cooperation for Methane Mitigation (19 million USD / 2023-26), Clean Air for Sustainable ASEAN (CASA) (11 million USD / 2023-26), and Capacity Building for Infectious Disease Preparedness and Response (5 million USD / 2022-26). Moreover, Seoul pledged to provide approximately 200 million USD to three ASEAN-related cooperation funds, namely ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Fund (AKCF), Mekong-ROK Cooperation Fund (MKCF) as well as BIMP-EAGA-ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF).

Last but not least, KASI was designed to enhance ASEAN centrality. This is the reason why South Korea announced the Initiative at the ASEAN-ROK Summit in Phnom Penh. According to the KASI document, Seoul planned to launch a flagship project to promote cooperation under

the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific's four priority areas, comprising maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and economic and other areas of cooperation, through the AKCF. South Korea also supports the "synergy" and collaboration among dialogue partners through enhanced policy dialogue on ASEAN. This idea opens the window of opportunity in engaging with other key players in the region.

To make Seoul's Strategy and KASI more cohesive and beneficial to the advancement of ASEAN centrality and community, some issues need to be addressed.

First, there is a concern of "overstretch" as the Indo-Pacific region in the Strategy covers all emerging regions in the world from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. This requires a large number of investment in time, human and financial resources to fulfill the promise. Therefore, the ROK should create "interoperability" by converging the country's foreign policy agenda with other middle powers and existing subregional mechanisms such as ACMECS and BIMSTEC. For instance, South Korea could work together with Japan, Australia and India on development cooperation by offering technical and financial support to the ASEAN region on strategic issues, particularly public health, climate change mitigation and adaptation, economic recovery and sustainable development.

Second, it seems that the nine lines of effort stated in the Strategy put forth "securitisation of things", which is relevant to the ongoing geopolitical competition. However, the concept of securitisation should be as stated in the rationale: inclusiveness, trust and reciprocity. The Strategy should not be used as a tool to contain any players inside or outside the region. As a country aspiring to be "Global Pivotal State", the ROK could play the role of bridge-builder, accommodating national interests of the developed and developing countries. On ASEAN regional issues, Seoul's diplomacy should be more pragmatic than value-oriented.

Third, it is the right time for South Korea to translate its cultural popularity from K-content industry into real “political and social soft power”. To do so, the country is required to build “networks of key opinion leaders”. KASI has already mentioned some areas, such as scholarships, women’s empowerment, capacity building in sports sector, cultural exchanges, and tourism, but these are not sufficient. Therefore, public diplomacy programmes with target audiences and deliverables should be executed. To illustrate, South Korea should consider hosting the ASEAN-ROK Public Diplomacy Conference to exchange views on concepts and case studies in public diplomacy as the country is at the forefront of the discipline. The ROK should also consider the establishment of the Korea Foundation branch office to help widen and deepen networks with key opinion leaders in all ASEAN countries. The ASEAN Foundation is a possible partner to collaborate on this issue.

Finally, Thailand and South Korea could work together to create “ASEAN-ROK content industry hub” in the ASEAN region. Thailand is a potential partner due to its strategic location as well as quality of production, distribution, and human resources in entertainment industry. K-content industry could be an additional area of cooperation to promote people-to-people connectivity with economic values under KASI because ASEAN countries are rich in cultural assets. In April 2023, the Mekong Institute (MI) and the Creative Economy Agency (CEA) jointly organised the “Hybrid Expert Talk on Promoting Resilient Creative Economy through Cross-Sectoral and Regional Collaboration” for the first time, as part of Isan (Northeast Thailand) Creative Festival 2023. According to Mr. Chutayaves Sinthuphan, Director of the Khon Kaen Office of the CEA, the event was “not only about Isan as a region, but also about neighbouring countries and the Greater Mekong Subregion countries”. Thus, there is a space where South Korea can play a constructive role.

The year 2024 is an important milestone as South Korea proposed to establish a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with ASEAN, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of dialogue relations. Thailand looks forward to working with the ROK as country coordinator of ASEAN-ROK dialogue relations in 2024-2027.

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